

Collective Behavior and Social Movements in Small-Scale Societies



Kuksu Big Head Dance, Indigenous Northern California

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This entry examines the relevance of the concepts and theories in the social movement and collective behavior literatures in sociology for explanations of long-term, large-scale social change. We discuss and critique the reasons given by some movement scholars to justify their focus on exclusively “modern” movements. We contend that collective behavior and social movements have been important causes of social change in small-scale societies composed of hunter-gatherers and horticulturalist, at least since the emergence of sedentism in the Mesolithic Era and perhaps before.

The scholarly study of social movements and collective behavior in sociology tends to focus on relatively recent “modern” movements, in part because scholars are more interested in movements that they either favor or oppose and in part because of implicit convictions that things have changed so much in the recent past that knowledge of earlier phenomena do not tell us much that is useful for understanding what is happening now. This presentism is usually taken for granted which can be seen

as an outcome of “mnemonic socialization” (Zerubavel 1998: 315; Hung 2003; Mills 2014) in western universities.

The reason given to justify not studying social movements in small-scale societies is that primitive movements were “reactive, backward, and parochial,” whereas modern movements are mainly proactive efforts to reform society or to restructure it. This idea conflates those movements that were “functional” because they professed a version of secular humanist ideology from those that employed religious ideas. Proactive movements are deemed to be rational efforts to engage and modify political regimes and social norms, whereas reactive movements are expressive and concerned with ideologically inspired identities and fantasies.

Modern social movements since the nineteenth century, have often been assumed by sociologists to have a set of unique features that legitimate dismissing the important roles played by social movements and collective behavior in the historical social change of small-scale societies. It is often assumed that repertoires of contention such as the strike, the demonstration, and the boycott were modern inventions despite the fact that historians have documented similar forms of collective action going back centuries (MacMullan 1963; Brunt 1971; Blasi 1988; Stark 1996; Richardson 2010; Collins and Manning 2016). This presentism is usually taken for granted, but some scholars have advanced explicit reasons for why they think it is appropriate to ignore historical events and processes.

Historical sociologist Eric Hobsbawm (1957, 1969) wrote fascinating studies of social banditry as a form of archaic class struggle that preceded (and eventually abetted) the emergence of the modern labor movement and revolutionary challenges to capitalism. Hobsbawm noted that bandits were often seen as heroes by peasants, and he sees the roots of modern class struggle in these premodern forms of resistance. But he also stresses the primitive and irrational nature of banditry in contrast with the allegedly more rational, instrumental, and formally organized nature of proletarian class struggle. These claims about the “primitive” nature of social movements in small-scale societies have been used as a justification for restricting the study of movements to those that occurred in “modern” societies.

Charles Tilly’s studies of the structural roots of contentious behavior in the West are very valuable, but Tilly excused ignoring the non-West and social movements in small-scale societies based on the distinction between reactive and proactive movements (Tilly and Wood 2013). The problem is that many Western and recent social movements have been, and are, reactive in the sense that they do not propose rational institutional solutions to problems. Yet, non-Western and premodern movements were often engaged with states and sometimes proposed changes in state institutions or the replacement of a bad leader with a good one. So, this distinction as applied to broad historical periods and world regions, is specious. It is a poor excuse for ignoring non-Western and premodern world history and prehistory. Ho-Fung Hung’s (2011: 1-17) careful and insightful study of protests during the mid-Qing dynasty in China provides a useful overview of the teleological distinction between modern and premodern social movements in the works of Marx and Weber, including many of the more recent leading lights in the social movement literature in sociology.

Historians, anthropologists and some sociologists who study revolutions have paid more attention to collective behavior and social movements in premodern societies. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that complex chiefdoms and early states were theocracies in which people had been mobilized to move to large settlements and to build large monuments based on new religious social movements (e.g. Pauketat 2009).

Jack Goldstone’s (2014) overview of revolutions in the Bronze and Iron ages contends that the demographic structural model that he developed for understanding state collapses in early modern societies operated in the rise and fall of dynasties in Bronze Age Egypt and Iron Age Greece and Rome (see also Turchin and Nefadov 2009). An overview of the ways that social movements caused cyclical trends of upswings and downswings in the scale of polities and settlements is provided in Chapter 1 of Chase-Dunn and Almeida (2020).

The most challenging issue regarding our understanding of the ways that social movements were causal elements in social change is with respect to societies in the Paleolithic and Mesolithic ages. Here the evidence is mainly indirect, as the sociocultural context was very different. We must therefore, adjust our concepts for the purpose of understanding what may have been going on. With the invention of writing and the availability of documents as evidence, it is much easier to see how social movements and collective behavior were causal in both the rise and the fall of dynasties. Small-scale human societies in the Stone Age did not have classes (Flannery and Marcus 2014). They were relatively egalitarian compared with the hierarchies that emerged as human societies became more complex and larger. We tend to think of social movements as efforts to mobilize against authority and inequalities, both of which are heightened in more complex societies. But how might collective behavior and social movements have operated in societies in which hierarchies were minimal?

David Snow and Sarah Soule (2010: 6-7) define social movements as:

collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity, partly outside institutional or organizational channels, for the purpose of challenging extant systems of authority, or resisting change in such systems, in the organization, polity, culture, or world system in which they are embedded.

This definition is sufficiently flexible to allow for its application to small-scale society settings in which authority structures were less hierarchical and organizational forms were less bureaucratic. All human polities have had some authority. In small scale societies it was mainly organized based on age. Though authority in small-scale societies was less centralized and had less power, contentious disagreements and disputes still occurred and people mobilized themselves and one another to address these conflicts. Violence within and between polities was regulated by kinship and a moral order that specified just retribution.

What we know about Stone Age societies comes from two main sources of evidence:

1. ethnographical studies of those small-scale societies that managed to survive to encounter complex societies that used writing, and
2. archaeological evidence.

Archaeological evidence is good for understanding things like what people ate, the evolution of tool kits and weapons, the sizes and structures of settlements, and trade networks revealed in the archaeological record of goods traded. Mortuary evidence also indicates inequalities, and genomic evidence can show population migrations. Skeletal evidence can show evidence of conflict, and signify intentional destruction of the built environment. But the study of social movements and collective action benefits from knowledge of frames of reference, the ideational meanings of symbols and monuments as well as ontological and moral beliefs, and heresies that are barely visible in archaeological evidence.

For these things we are reliant on documents in which literate observers reported on the activities and beliefs of people living in small-scale societies, and ethnographers trained to study the languages and cultures of these peoples. These sources provide evidence that is more germane to the study of social movements, but it raises the question as to whether or not the hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists who managed to survive to be studied by people with chirographic abilities, are representative of the Stone Age peoples who lived thousands of years ago. We know that they have been greatly affected by their interactions with complex and hierarchical societies and so they may not be representative of those small-scale societies from which all the complex societies evolved. The part of North America that became California is a good place to study in this regard, because we know from archaeological evidence that there had been little interaction with large-scale complex societies before colonization by the Spanish in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Alfred Kroeber, his colleagues and students made herculean efforts to document the languages and cultures of indigenous Californians in the early 20th century through archaeology and ethnographic studies of the memories and practices of surviving native Californians. After the publication of James Mooney's study of the 1890 Ghost Dance religion, Kroeber sent Cora Dubois to find all the old Native Californians she could locate who could remember the events of the earlier 1870 Ghost Dance as it had spread from Western Nevada into California and Southern Oregon (Dubois 2007[1939]). Ethnographers had already studied the ideologies and rituals of native Californians (e.g., Kroeber 1925; Gifford 1926). Therefore, Dubois could compare what happened with the arrival of the 1870 Ghost Dance –whether the new ideas were rejected or accepted, study the mixing of Ghost Dance doctrines with earlier ideas, and try to explain why some local groups enthusiastically embraced the millenarian Ghost Dance while others did not.

The most popular interpretation of the Ghost Dance was that it was a “revitalization movement” in which small-scale societies that were under threat of cultural and demographic extinction, combined indigenous and Christian ideological elements to help them adjust to the pressures of colonization and incorporation into the expanding Europe-centered world-system (summarized in Wallace 1956; see also Smoak 2006, Thornton 1981).

A similar interpretation was applied to the “cargo cults” of colonized peoples in on islands in the Western Pacific Ocean by some of the ethnographers who studied social movements there. Cargo cults were millenarian movements encompassing a diverse range of practices and that occurred in the wake of contact with the commercial networks of colonizing European polities. The name derives from the belief that various ritualistic acts will lead to a bestowing of material wealth (“cargo”). Worsley (1968) saw the millenarianism of the cargo cults as having been borrowed from Christian missionaries, whereas Lawrence (1964) contended that millenarianism was an endemic part of the precontact indigenous culture. Norman Cohn (1970;1993) argued that millenarianism had been invented by Zoroaster and then diffused to Palestine and then was adopted by Christendom. But it may be that most cultures have both the idea of a constant universal order and a sequence of qualitative transformations in which the old world is ending and a new world is being borne (e.g. Ownby 1999). Millenarianism is trotted out as a powerful motivational idea by prophets who mobilize people proclaiming a “hurry-up word,” a phrase that was told to Cora DuBois by an informant regarding the 1870 Ghost Dance.

Revitalization movements were (and are) important phenomena that tell us a great deal about people's efforts to defend and adapt their ways of life during their incorporation into more complex and hierarchical world-systems. Indeed, as suggested by Dubois (2007:116), colonial situations in the Iron Age empires engendered religious social movements some of which became world religions that eased the pain of conquered peoples by constructing a moral order within which they had the promise of justice in the afterlife (Blasi 1988; Stark 1996). There is a significant congruence between the ideology of salvation that emerged from an Iron Age Roman colony in Palestine and the situation of indigenous peoples of the Americas. Some of the ethnographers who studied indigenous California saw the late 19th century movements as containing elements of collective behavior that had probably been going on in the indigenous world-system before it was incorporated into the modern system (Spier 1935; Suttles 1987; Ruby 1985). Dances, songs, and new technologies and ideas were already spreading across local polities before the arrival of the Europeans.

Still, science has not yet invented the tools necessary to understand a variety of non-Western forms of writing, such as “time-balls” found among some Indigenous Peoples' of the Columbia Plateau (Scheuerman et al. 2010: 51), or quipu (knot-record) used by the Incas and other Andean cultures. Genocide complicates the matter further. This may be another reason for presentism. Orlando Patterson (2019) argues that we do not study slavery directly because it forces us to think about how foundational violence is for western society; genocide might have a similar effect. Many

Indigenous Peoples have oral traditions that, when triangulated with the geological, archeological, anthropological, and historical records, can aid in our understanding of social movements in small-scale societies. For example, the ancestors of the Nimiipuu were not a salmon people until about 2,000 years ago after a big earthquake changed the river conditions to support salmon. This coincide with the appearance of permanent villages (Ames and Marshall 1980; Davis 2007). Stories of Coyote climbing mountains and destroying dams to bring salmon from the ocean to the Peoples of the Columbia Plateau, can provide insights into collective adaptation and understanding of new ecological conditions. Before salmon, camas gardening was the primary food source for the Nimiipuu (Ames and Marshall 1980). They also became more hierarchical in the 18th century after the incorporation of the horse. According to oral traditions, prophets foretold the coming of white men (Ruby and Brown 1989); breeding horses for war and trading a “Plateau culture [for a] Plains culture” would require social movement-type of mobilization and organization.

Sociocultural evolution was slower in the Stone Age than it became later, but small-scale polities were mobilizing and expanding, population density was increasing, and new forms of exchange and integration were emerging. In what became California, archaeological evidence shows the expansion and contraction of trade networks based on down-the-line exchange in which goods and symbols of value (shell-bead proto-money) moved over rather long distances (Chase-Dunn and Mann (1996:36, 140-141). Kroeber (1925) summarized descriptions of the Kuksu cult in several Northern California tribelets. The practice of Kuksu religion included elaborate narrative ceremonial dances and specific regalia. The men of the tribelet practiced rituals to ensure good health, bountiful harvests, hunts, fertility, and good weather. Ceremonies included an annual mourning observance, rites of passage, and intervention with the spirit world. A male secret society met in underground dance rooms and danced in costumes at the public dances. The Kuksu cult is identified archaeologically by the discovery of underground dance rooms and wooden dance drums.

Elsewhere in that part of Native North America that became the United States, archaeological evidence shows that small-scale societies of hunter-gatherers had constructed rather large ritual monuments well before the emergence of sedentism and horticulture. In what became northern Louisiana hunter-gatherers came together in large numbers to build monumental earthen mounds at two locations: Watson’s Break around 3500 BCE (Hermann *et al* 2014) and Poverty Point around 1500 BCE (Sassaman 2005). The highly structured Poverty Point complex was built at about the same time as the Olmec civilization was emerging in Veracruz, Mexico. These projects strongly suggest that a religious ideology was shared among these nomadic foragers. An impressive degree of organized cooperative effort was needed to produce these artifacts, suggesting a process of mobilization and collective action amongst peoples who did not have institutionalized hierarchy.

The evidence that collective behavior and social movements was playing a causal role in social reproduction and social change in small-scale societies has been ignored even by those social movement scholars who contend that movements and revolutions were indeed important in Bronze and Iron Age dynastic rise and fall. An anthropological/archaeological framework of comparison for understanding the evolution of sociocultural complexity and hierarchy can and should include the insights provided by theories of collective behavior and social movements. By seeing both the continuities and the qualitative changes that have occurred over the millennia we are better prepared to comprehend what is still happening regarding large-scale social change.

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